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ABSTRACT

The maintenance of self-imposed delay of gratification by preschool children was briefly examined in two studies. One study investigated the effects of overt verbalization on the delay behavior of 75 preschool children. Children who periodically spoke of the delayed reward during the delay task, regardless of whether they spoke positively or negatively, waited less than subjects who were not instructed to make any particular statement during delay. Children who uttered a positive statement about waiting delayed longer than non-instructed subjects, while children who spoke negatively of waiting did not differ in delay from non-instructed subjects. A related study, involving 98 preschoolers, examined the influence of two factors--the content of overt self-verbalization (rewards or waiting) and freedom of choice (statement selected by child, statement assigned to child by experimenter, statement periodically heard by passive child)--on delay maintenance. The influence of specific statements was affected by the level of involvement allowed the child in the selection and utterance of the statements. (Author/SE)

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Overt Verbalization and Delay Behavior in Children: The Effects of Evaluative Statements and Freedom of Choice

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Self-imposed delay of gratification has been approached as a two part phenomenon--the choice of a delayed or immediate reward and the maintenance of delay by the individual over time after he/she has chosen to wait. In a recent study, Toner and Smith (1977) found that the content of overt self-verbalizations uttered by children during a waiting period greatly influenced their delay maintenance. For preschool and grade-school children, a verbalization that focused on the delayed candy reward ("The candy will taste good") resulted in less waiting than did a verbalization about the act of waiting ("It is good to wait"). When no instructions to verbalize during delay were provided, older subjects waited successfully while preschoolers demonstrated little delay.

In response to the findings of Toner and Smith, two studies were executed to determine if the effect of overt verbalization on delay behavior would be modified by 1) a manipulation of the evaluative reference made to the target of the child's statement, and 2) a manipulation of the child's role in the selection of the statement he/she would use. The procedure was identical to that used by Toner and Smith wherein the child's possession of accumulating candy rewards was made contingent upon stopping further accumulation.

In the study assessing the influence of evaluative references, a sample of 75 preschool children was evenly divided into five experimental groups and each child was tested individually. Children who periodically spoke of the delayed reward during the delay task, regardless of the evaluative statement used ("I like the tokens" or "I don't like the tokens"), waited less than

subjects who were not instructed to make any particular statement during delay. Children who uttered a positive statement about waiting ("I like to wait") delayed longer than non-instructed subjects while children who spoke negatively of waiting did not differ in delay from non-instructed subjects. Positive and negative statements about waiting apparently resulted in the execution of plans to wait or not to wait by the child.

In a related study, a sample of 98 preschoolers was evenly divided into seven experimental groups to determine the influence of the content of overt self-verbalization (rewards or waiting) and freedom of choice (statement selected by child, statement assigned to child by experimenter, statement periodically heard by passive child) on delay maintenance in the standard task. Preschoolers who periodically uttered or listened to the reward-centered statement ("The candy will taste good") during the delay task waited less than did preschoolers who periodically uttered or listened to the task-centered statement ("It is good to wait"). Further, free choice of the statements increased their influence while passive listening reduced their influence. Children given no direction regarding what to do during the waiting period delayed less than did children in the task-centered conditions and about the same as did children in the reward-centered groups, suggesting that preschoolers spontaneously employ delay plans which do not maximally facilitate self-control.

These studies provide further evidence of the influence of self-verbalization on self-control in children. The present studies further demonstrate

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that (1) when speaking of a plan of action, the effect can be dramatically modified by the evaluative statement that accompanies the utterance, and (2) the influence of specific statements can be affected by the level of involvement allowed the child in the selection and utterance of the statements.

Reference

Toner, I. J. and Smith, R. A. Age and overt verbalization in delay maintenance behavior in children. Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 1977, 23, 123-128.